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Captain Scotten's report on the Problem of Mafia in Sicily

Transmits copy of a report dated 29th October from Captain W.E. Scotten to Brigadier General Holmes on "The Problem of Mafia in Sicily".

Last Paper.

R 11482

References.

(Print.)

(How disposed of.)

(Minutes.)

Para. 8 of this report maintains that Mafia activities have considerably revived since the occupation of Sicily.

Para. 11, stating that hoarding and the black market constitute the main problems of AMG, refers to the part played by Mafia in food racketeering.

Paras 13-16 consider possible means of dealing with the situation.

C. M. Weesday
13.11.

A.R.
13/11

(Action
completed.)

D.H.H.

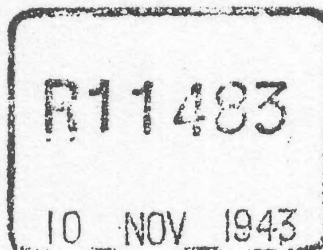
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W.E.
28/11

Next Paper.

R11500

P.L. No. 85 ✓



The British Resident Minister at Allied Force Headquarters, Algiers, presents his compliments to the Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and has the honour to transmit herewith copy(ies) of the under-mentioned document(s)

...4th November, 1943

Reference to previous correspondence:

| Description | Date |
|---|--------------------|
| Captain W.E. Scotton to Brigadier General Holmes. The problem of Mafia in Sicily | 29th October, 1943 |

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29 Oct 1943.

MEMORANDUM

To: Brigadier General Holmes

From: Capt. W.E. Scotten

Subject: The Problem of Mafia in Sicily.

1. This memorandum has been prepared for the information of Brigadier General Holmes at the request of Colonel Bolles, Commissioner of Public Safety at AMG headquarters, Palermo, and the Deputy Commissioner, Lieutenant Colonel Martin, who preferred to bring the matter to his attention through personal messenger, so as to avoid compromising the success of any steps which might be taken against Mafia in future and because of the delicate political nature of the problem. Colonel Bolles, Lieutenant Colonel Martin, together with Lieutenant Colonel Snooks, of the Public Safety Division at Palermo, are agreed that the problem is of a grave and urgent character. They feel that the far-reaching questions of military government policy involved, the magnitude of the task itself, the commitments in personnel and the special methods necessary to be employed for a solution by direct action require that they receive a mandate from higher authority as to the manner and extent in which the problem is to be dealt with by them before they can decide what course to pursue.

2. Since Brigadier General MacSherry was absent from the city at the time of his visit, the writer called upon Colonel Spofford in hospital and outlined to him the course laid down for him by the commissioners. Colonel Spofford requested that a memorandum concerning the problem of Mafia be handed to Brigadier General MacSherry, and it is therefore suggested that a copy of these notes be made available to him.

3. In the way of background, a statement of the origin and nature of Mafia may not be out of place at this point. This material will represent the result of observations made by the writer during his tour of duty of over three years in the island as American Vice Consul at Palermo. The history of Sicily is one of successive foreign invasions and occupations, separated by periods of negligent and frequently oppressive government, all of which has left its mark on the character of the people and their social institutions. Under conditions of neglect and oppression by governments unable or unwilling to provide for internal security and inclined to deny rather than to ensure the operation of justice in the island, particularly in the interior, where the invader had a few or no interests and where communications were poor or non-existent, there grew up among the Sicilians a system of private safeguards for their persons and property known as Mafia. This took the form of a kind of feudal system, in which the people at large placed themselves, their flocks, crops, and groves, under the protection of local braves (mafiosi), who in return received tribute in kind or money. The local mafiosi were grouped under stronger leaders who held sway over a larger area, embracing possibly several communes (capi mafiosi or capi Mafia). These in turn would owe allegiance to still more powerful leaders, who might control Mafia activity on a feudal basis over a whole region representing a large fraction of a province. It cannot be said that there existed a central Mafia authority for the whole island or for units of territory even so large as a province or that a formal organization was recognized by all Mafia elements in Sicily. However, it was universally the case that Mafia leaders, high and low, had mutual and generally well-respected understandings among themselves with regard to their spheres of activity, usually on a territorial basis, but also frequently in larger centers of population on a functional basis (i.e., in the city of Palermo one group might control the marketing of fish, another the carting of lemons, and still another /

another the docks and warehouses). It is true that bitter strife often took place between individual leaders for control of one or another area or sphere of activity, but these were generally settled personally between the parties involved and their immediate following and rarely degenerated into large-scale conflicts of the dimensions assumed by modern gang warfare.

4. It is important, for a proper understanding of Mafia, to note that under no circumstances would any individual or group in the realm of Mafia resort to denunciation to the authorities as a means of vengeance or to bring about the downfall of rivals. Mutual solidarity against the authorities is a cardinal rule of Mafia. Nor would any individual, though put to torture, reveal the identity of his own associates or that of other mafiosi, however remotely connected. These are aspects of the Mafia code of honour, loosely described as "omertà", the literal meaning of which is approximated by the English term "secrecy". This code holds good today, as in the past. By extension, it is held by Mafia to apply as well to all who have dealings with Mafia, even to those who suffer from its depredations. In fact, observance of this code to a greater or less degree by the major portion of the Sicilian population may be said to have become almost a racial characteristic.

5. Whatever may have been the necessity or justification for Mafia in any given epoch, in our times it had degenerated into a criminal system, the object of which was to commit extortion and theft with impunity. To accomplish this, no method or means was neglected, ranging from threats and terrorism to outright murder, arson, kidnapping, and mayhem. The police, up until the time that Mafia engaged the attention of the Fascist government, were powerless to control it. Mafia activities spread until they affected, directly or indirectly, Sicilians in every walk of life and on every level of society. It was found extorting tribute from the hardmen and peasants, as well as from the large landed proprietors in the pastoral and agricultural districts, from manufacturers, exporters, and tradesmen, wholesale and retail, in the cities, from the fishermen on the coasts and the charcoal-burners in the mountains. The class of society which became most closely associated with Mafia was naturally that, in the interior, found principally in the western and central sections of the island. This class, for the most part titled nobility, found it indispensable for the protection of its broad holdings in the remote areas of the interior, its flocks, forests, and crops, to submit and even ally itself with Mafia, in the absence of adequate police safeguards. This alliance was one which Mafia found it profitable to cultivate for more than one reason, not the least of which was the desire to entangle in its meshes persons in high places who could serve to protect its own members when need arose, even to the extent of intervention in Rome on their behalf.

6. As a matter of fact, Mafia, before the advent of Fascism, had reached the position of holding the balance of political power in Sicily. It could control elections, and it was courted by political personages and parties. Such was the fear inspired by the name of Mafia, even the most respectable elements, however much they may have deplored the institution and desired its destruction, were constrained to submit to it and accept its "protection". To resist its demands, to report to the authorities even that demands had been made, meant destruction of a citizen's property, threats, violence, or death to himself or to members of his family. Once under the influence of Mafia, these respectable elements, represented often by leaders in professional, financial, and industrial fields, were used as tools by Mafia for obtaining practical immunity from interference with its operations, large and small. Under these conditions, the bringing of individuals to trial for even the most shocking outrages, the perpetrators of

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which were well known to the public at large, as well as to the police, was out of the question. None dared to denounce them, none dared testify against them, no judge or prosecutor dared apply the law. The police universally shut their eyes. Victims of robbery feared to recognize their own property in the hands of others or of the authorities. Families of murdered persons feared to identify the assailants who had committed the crimes in their very presence. Sicily lay under a reign of terror, in which peace and safety for the individual citizen lay only in complete submission to the rule of Mafia.

7. Due partly, perhaps, to its political affiliations and power, Mafia at an early period engaged the interest of the Fascist regime.

Finally, during the years 1931-32, the Prefect of the Province of Palermo, Cesare Mori, under instructions from Rome undertook a wide campaign against Mafia, which was, in fact, eminently successful so far as it went. It was heralded at home and abroad by the regime as a great Fascist triumph in the struggle against an age-old scourge, wherein all preceding governments had failed. However, Fascist claims to have eradicated Mafia were exaggerated. The activities of Mafia in the country districts were the principal object of Mori's operations, and these were limited to areas where Mafia was (and still is) most strongly entrenched, namely: the provinces of Palermo, Trapani, Agrigento, and Caltanissetta. His attack on Mafia was mainly directed toward the lower levels and sought to destroy the more notorious bands and clear out their long-inviolable strongholds, such as Gangi, Petralia, Piana dei Greci, Favara, etc. A few small-time rackets in the city of Palermo and others were also broken up. But the higher level of Mafia was not appreciably interfered with, except as it may have felt indirectly the effect of the strong and exemplary measures employed. According to the statement of many serious people in Sicily, Mori was ordered by Rome to slacken his efforts when it became apparent that a complete housecleaning would involve too many high-ranking professional and business people and even influential members of the Party. Hints of this situation appear in Mori's book, "Con la Mafia ai Ferri Corti". Thus it should be said that Mafia was only driven underground under Fascism; it was never stamped out in any sense of the word. During the writer's residence in Sicily there were sporadic, small-scale outbreaks of robbery and violence, but there never appeared in the press any notice thereof. Furthermore, to the writer's certain knowledge, there were innumerable rackets, big and small, functioning under Mafia control, which the Fascist regime appeared either to tolerate or to be unable to wipe out. It seems as though the regime was satisfied with the suppression of the more outrageous aspects of the system and thenceforth refused to admit officially that Mafia existed any longer in the island.

8. All contacts made by the writer with the Sicilian population during his recent visit are in complete agreement that since the occupation of the island and the overthrow of Fascism Mafia has given evidence of a widespread revival. Likewise this fact has not escaped the notice of operatives of the CIC, the Political Intelligence Section of AMG Headquarters, and the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of Public Safety of AMG at Palermo. The view that there has been a strong resurgence of Mafia since the occupation of Sicily, that it has grave implications in the present and future political situation in the island and on the mainland of Italy, and that it is necessary to deal with the problem at the earliest possible moment is shared by the special representative of the Department of State, Mr. Alfred T. Nester, of the Office of Civil Affairs at Algiers, former American Consul at Palermo, who is at present on a tour of investigation in Sicily. Reports are constantly flowing in, especially from the operatives of the CIC, that Mafia is becoming increasingly bold in many areas. Already our own courts have been obliged to deal with flagrant outbreaks in the province of AGRIGENTO. The question arises as to the extent of this resurgence. This is a difficult question to answer, and the setting on foot of an inquiry to determine it exactly, even if it had any chance of success (which is most unlikely) would in all probability compromise the success of subsequent operations for the solution of the problem. But according to the writer's sources, it has not yet gone so far that it could not be dealt with successfully by employing swift and uncompromising measures.

measures. If direct action is to be the method chosen, then time, in their opinion, is of the essence. Mafia has not yet regained its old strength after 15 years of comparative inactivity, its organization is still to a considerable degree disrupted and localized, and the public at large is not yet under the incubus of fear and silence which Mafia knows how to impose. But this fear is rapidly returning, and once it has set in, the problem for the police will be multiplied many times over. According to the writer's informants, Mafia is now providing itself with the latest types of modern weapons and equipment gathered up on the battlefield, large stores of such equipment, including machine guns, trench mortars, and even light field pieces, land mines, field radios, and ample stores of munitions are supposed to be in their hands, hidden in caves and wells, especially around Mt. Etna.

9. As pointed out in a preceding paragraph, Mafia can scarcely be described as possessing a formal organization with a recognized hierarchy of leaders. What organization it has is more horizontal in character than vertical. It is an association of criminals, the common bond of which is their mutual interest in frustrating interference from the authorities. It is a conspiracy against the forces of law which takes form essentially in the conspiracy of silence known as omerta, a code imposed on its victims as well as on the general public, who are thus forced to become involuntary accomplices. Mafia, is, in a sense, more than an association; it is also a social system, a way of life, a profession. Thus the difficulty, from the police standpoint, lies in the peculiar nature of Mafia itself. If it had a formal organization, progressive removal of its leaders from the top down would cause its collapse. Unlike in most communities, the Sicilian public may be expected to avoid at all costs cooperation with the police, and this refusal will become more complete the more active the police become in their efforts, at least until the point is reached at which public confidence in police protection is restored.

10. The people of Sicily have no confidence in the ability of the Carabinieri or other police services to deal with Mafia. They regard them as corrupt, weak, and in many instances either in league with Mafia itself, receiving a share individually in the proceeds of the rackets, or completely cowed by it. What is more disquieting, they claim there are numerous cases of our own CAO's and interpreters of Sicilian origin and ancestry, whose family connections or antecedents in the United States have led them directly into the sphere of Mafia.

They maintain that higher ranking officers have succumbed to the blandishments of the landed gentry, who are in close association with Mafia for reasons not only traditional but also arising out of their present mutual political aspirations, as will appear below. They affirm that our officers are being misled and blinded by corrupt or influenced interpreters and advisors, to the extent that they are in danger of becoming the unwitting tools of Mafia. Thus the Sicilians are rapidly losing confidence in our own ability to deal with the problem of Mafia, even should we so desire. Information brought in by the Political Intelligence Section and CIC operatives unfortunately tend to lend credence to these allegations. Officers of the Public Safety Division are not prepared to deny them.

11. The most serious single problem now confronting the administration of AMG in Sicily is that of hoarding and the black market in food and other basic necessities. This is a situation made to order for Mafia, and according to serious sources, it has not been slow to take advantage thereof. In their opinion, the large-scale hijacking and purloining of food and other articles from under the nose of the military which has recently taken place at Palermo is to be laid at the door of Mafia, and in fact the organization and method employed in /

in these wholesale operations are typical of it. The ferreting out of grain hoards in the country districts is considered impossible, so long as Mafia remains uncontrolled, since much of it is the hands of landed proprietors or speculators who are under Mafia protection or is in the hands of Mafia itself, and none dares to reveal the whereabouts of these hoards. Omerta has shut the mouths of the peasants, and the Carabinieri are either bought off or frightened by the usual methods.

12. The present political significance of Mafia is readily understood in the light of what has been said above with reference to its association with the landed proprietors. In a word, the separatist movement as it stands today is mainly supported by two mutually interested and interdependent groups, the landed proprietors and Mafia. The reasons for their political solidarity are many and are so obvious as to require no discussion. In the eyes of the Sicilians, the AMG has allowed itself to become surrounded with separatist friends and advisors and has consistently appointed to public office either outright separatists or persons of separatist sympathy. Examples of these are given as the Prefect of the Province of Palermo, the majority of the members of the provincial Giunta, the Sindaco (mayor) of Palermo, and so forth. According to some sources, at least 80% of the appointments made by the AMG in this area have been of this class. In their opinion the AMG has not only placed itself at a disadvantage to deal with Mafia, it has even gone so far as to play into its hands. Thus today there are many Sicilians who are making the following comparison between AMG and Fascism: (a) under Fascism there was shortage and rationing of food and a black market, but the food ration was actually forthcoming and the black market was partially controlled, whereas today the ration is unobtainable much of the time and the black market in food has gotten completely out of hand (e.g.: macaroni was 80 lire per kg. at Palermo on 20 Oct. bread 45 lire per kg., as compared with the official price for bread of 10 lire per kg., etc., etc.); (b) under Fascism, Mafia, if not entirely suppressed, was at least held very much in check, whereas at present it is growing at an alarming rate and is even enjoying a favoured position under AMG. These views are reported, of course merely as indications of the trend of the public mind in Sicily.

13. Irrespective of popular views toward the question or its political aspects, it is submitted that Mafia presents today a most pressing problem, possibly difficult of appreciation by those who have not actually come into contact with it through residence in the island. It is one with which the AMG will be obliged to deal sooner or later. Failure to do so might have a most unfortunate effect on the whole program of Allied military government in Italy and provide the enemy with material for damaging propaganda. There would appear to be three courses open:

- (a) direct, stringent, and prompt action to bring Mafia under control.
- (b) a negotiated truce with the Mafia leaders;
- (c) abandonment of any attempt to control Mafia throughout the island and withdrawal to small enclaves enclosing strategic base areas, around which protective cordons would be thrown and within which absolute military government would be exercised.

14. The first course would appear to be the only one consistent with the expressed objectives of military government. However, it is one which requires a careful appraisal of the ways and means available at the present juncture. It would require swift and decisive action within a period of days or weeks, at most. It would require the most cautious and secret preparations, strong reinforcement of the Carabinieri with allied military personnel, and concerted and simultaneous, arrest, regardless of personalities and political connections, of between five and six hundred leaders, and their deportation.

deportation without any semblance of trial for detainment for the duration of the war. These measures are believed to be sufficient to break the back of Mafia for at least two or three years, perhaps, if the police are stiffened and reorganised and the popular fear of Mafia removed, for an indefinite period.

15. The second course suggested is one in which success is less assured. Its success would depend upon extraordinary secrecy with respect to the Sicilians, the personnel of AMG itself, and the home populations. It would depend upon the personality of the negotiator and his ability to win the confidence of the Mafia leaders. It would depend in the last analysis upon the bare word of honor of these leaders. They might be approached along the following lines:-

- (a) the Allies' only interest in governing Sicily is the furtherance of their war effort;
- (b) the Allies have no desire to interfere in the internal affairs of Sicily and wish to return its government to the Sicilian people at the earliest practicable moment;
- (c) the Allies have the power to destroy Mafia but do not find it convenient to commit the military forces, necessary for the task;
- (d) if Mafia agrees to desist from all activities involving the movement and marketing of food or other necessities required by the population or products needed in the prosecution of the war or activities involving conditions of transport and communications in the island and the operation of ports and bases and the labor employed therein and agrees to abstain from interference with the personnel and operations of AMG, then the Allies agree not to interfere with Mafia as such, except to detect and punish common crime through the operation of the ordinary Italian police and judicial agencies.

In a word this solution would mean the acceptance to a certain degree on the part of the Allies of the principle of omertà, a code which Mafia really understands and respects.

16. The third course is the course of least resistance. It is the course of weakness and will so be interpreted by the enemy, by the rest of Italy, by other enemy-occupied countries who are watching the experiment of AMG, and by the home populations. It may well mean the abandonment of the island to criminal rule for a long time to come. On the other hand, its chance of success is certain.